

# OFF THE GRID

Country Mile Gardens recently installed a solar array to cover 100% of its energy use.

By Teresa McPherson

**C**ountry Mile Gardens, a family-owned and operated garden center in Harding, New Jersey, has installed a 35kW solar system to cover 100% of its energy use.

The solar array, situated on 2,000 square feet of the 3-acre property, will produce an estimated 39.4 megawatt hours per year. Over the next 30 years, it will offset the equivalent CO<sub>2</sub> from burning 900 tons of coal.

## A Green Mindset

Brothers Thomas and Dan Gallo recently purchased Country Mile Gardens from their father, Tom Gallo, who started the business in 1977. The installation is the most recent move in their effort to reduce the environmental impact of their business. Other improvements include selling more organic and native plant materials, recycling

more packaging and sourcing from more local growers.

"Dan and I, with backgrounds in environmental science and biology, are both very aware of the benefits of renewable energy and how climate change can impact our local environment, as well as our business," says Thomas Gallo, co-owner.

"Having put solar panels on my house already, we knew a bit about what the options were and what we could do," Gallo says. "So we reached out to several solar companies in the area to show them the area where we wanted to put a carport like structure and let them show us what it would look like, along with price quotes. We ended up using a local company out of Madison, New Jersey, that a friend put us in touch with called Greenhouse Solar."

The 80-panel system was designed and installed by





Brothers Thomas and Dan Gallo are co-owners of Country Mile Gardens.

"First, it makes sense financially," he says. "The system will pay for itself in roughly six years given current markets, and then after that we have zero electric bill as well as being able to sell SREC (Solar Renewable Energy Credits) on the open market. After the system is paid off, we will be making money.

"We are hooked up to the grid and any excess energy flows back into the grid. We estimate that we will make about 5 to 10% more than we need for the year and we will be paid for the extra energy."

Green House Solar with high-efficiency panels manufactured by SunPower.

In addition to harvesting solar power, the array will provide shade to shade-loving plants.

### Why Solar?

Country Mile Gardens invested \$124,000 in the installation and expects to see a return on investment within six years. That payoff was one of several reasons Gallo says they decided to go solar.

"Secondly, we wanted to reduce our carbon footprint. Between fans, lights, well pumps, and the rest of our operation we use a lot of electricity. With a solar system creating 100% of our needs, we will completely eliminate that aspect of our carbon footprint.

"As a garden center, weather is a tremendous factor on our business and having a more stable climate is very important," he says.

"Finally, it is good from a PR perspective. Our customers care about the environment and will appreciate that we have taken steps to help reduce our carbon footprint."

### Practical Advice

Gallo says he would definitely encourage other garden centers to put up a solar system.

"Anything we can do to help reduce climate change should be a priority for everyone, and especially a business as intimately bound to the weather as ours," he says. "In addition, it's a no-brainer financially and will definitely make your business look good to customers."

He advises businesses considering a solar array to allocate more time than they might think for the project. "We started the process in January and signed a contract in February, but it still took more time than the installer anticipated," he says. "Town permitting, problems with the excavating, and build time were all longer than expected."

For more information, visit [www.countrymilegardens.com](http://www.countrymilegardens.com).

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